Salvaging and Scapegoating: Slum Evictions on Chennai's Waterways

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The latest Cooum river restoration project in Chennai aims to focus on slum eviction as an achievable first step. A 19-kilometre elevated expressway on the river is also planned. Together estimated to displace over 18,000 families from the banks of the Cooum, these two projects testify to how waterfront development, beautification, and eco-restoration, along with high-end infrastructure serve multiple purposes – both as direct strategies for capital accumulation through real estate value, as well as idioms through which cities position themselves in the global arena.

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The river Cooum, which cuts through the centre of Chennai, is notorious for its stench and its sewage-laden, stagnant waters. Yet it carries a long history of clean-up efforts, starting with the Cooum Improvement Project of 1967, through the central government-funded, Rs 1,200 crore Chennai City River Conservation Project launched in 2001, to the latest project announced with great fanfare in late 2009. This one, estimated to cost another Rs 1,200 crore, is projected as the personal mission of M K Stalin, Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and son of Chief Minister M Karunanidhi. The project is to be planned by the Public Utilities Board of Singapore and modelled on the Singapore River Restoration Project.

However, given the legacy of failed restoration efforts and the current state of the river, any pronouncement on the waterway, as Devasahayam (2009) claims, "has low credibility". The latest Cooum restoration project makes its bid for credibility by proposing to cut through the thicket of familiar problems typically besetting river cleaning efforts,[1] and focusing on slum eviction as an achievable first step. This shortcut approach is openly announced, confidently addressing a growing urban middle class constituency who hold slum-dwellers responsible for the state of the rivers, and regard their summary removal as the crux of eco-restoration. Thus, a press article announcing the Cooum restoration plan in 2009 stated (Ramakrishnan 2009):

> A host of factors has contributed to the Cooum problem. …Conscious of the fact that some options for attacking the problem consume more time, the authorities are now focusing on one aspect – removing encroachments in the city limits and developing the areas retrieved into parks. This will ensure aesthetic appeal and utility.

While most announcements about the river restoration carried scant information on the proposed action plan for reviving the all-but-dead waterway, they highlighted the greening and beautification components which were to be implemented on a priority basis. The article continued (Ramakrishnan 2009):

> [The government]…is keen that the retrieved stretches of the Cooum banks are handed over…to the Chennai Corporation for turning the stretches into a green cover of the city, says [an] official…The civic body is contemplating…plans for converting the retrieved stretches of the river into parks. Greenery and presence of walking paths are the essential elements of such plans, the official adds.

Simultaneously, in late 2009, plans were also announced for the construction of a 19-km elevated expressway on the river at a cost of over Rs 1,600 crore. This project of the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) was designed to facilitate the movement of container trucks from the national highway at Maduravoyal to the Chennai Port. Instead of augmenting the existing straight road connection along Poonamallee High Road, the consultants Wilbur Smith Associates proposed a much longer alignment, closely following the sharply curving path of the Cooum. This choice was justified in the feasibility report as follows (Wilbur Smith Associates 2008: 2.1):

> Taking the project road along the river banks has the following clear advantages. … *Construction of such project road will result in the evacuation of slum areas present along the riverbanks…* (emphasis added)

Thus, manipulating the curving contours of a natural flow into the format of a high-speed corridor, despite its seeming inefficiency, apparently yields collateral value addition in the form of slum clearance. Infrastructure development projects in globalising cities, thus, compress multiple rationalities of neoliberal governance into their proposals: the creation of infrastructure assets, enhancement of commercial values, and promotion of real estate investments are all mutually reinforcing drives. Within this closed circuit of raisons d'état, beautification, restoration and development serve as metonyms for slum clearance.

Faulty Design, Poor Procedure, Hasty Implementation

Together, the two projects are expected to displace over 18,000 families from the

banks of the Cooum, according to the government's own estimates.[2] Evictions were launched with a fury in late 2009 by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) in fulfilment of the state government's sole role in the elevated corridor project, that of securing the land. As with most "world-class infrastructure" projects across the country, the evictions were characterised by procedural violations, irregularities and illegalities on the part of governmental agencies, both at state and central levels. Most egregious were those provoked by the unseemly and illegal haste with which the project was pushed through.

In January 2010, the ministry of environment and forests at the centre refused environmental clearance for the elevated expressway as a section of it fell within the inter-tidal zone along the river, in violation of Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) rules. Before obtaining such mandatory clearances, the foundation stone for the expressway had already been laid by the prime minister in January 2009. The contract had been awarded to Soma Enterprises, and an initial payment of Rs 260 crore handed over to the contractors (Devasahayam 2010). By December 2009, with the restoration project still in an inception stage, nearly 5,000 families from at least four slums along the river banks had been forcibly and prematurely evicted for the two projects. In March 2010, the project came under the scrutiny of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for a range of alleged irregularities.

Both the proposed projects on the Cooum, separately and together, encountered stringent criticism from independent experts and professionals in the city. At a seminar held at the Madras Institute of Development Studies in February 2010, a panel of speakers, including transportation engineers and urban governance experts, identified serious technical flaws in the expressway's design, as well as a host of governance failures relating to mandatory clearances and procedures for evictions and resettlement (Venkat 2010). Hydrology experts and environmentalists pointed out that tampering with the depth and width of the river could have serious adverse impacts on the river's already fragile ecology, and that, regardless of assurances about mitigating measures, an expressway built into the riverbed would cause stagnation of sewage-laden river waters during non-rainy seasons and inundation of adjoining areas during the monsoon season.

All the speakers agreed that the two projects along the Cooum, apart from being poorly planned, contradicted one another in intent and effect. These contradictions can only be understood by considering the context from which these projects have emerged.

Eco-restoration and Transport Corridors

Waterways restoration efforts must be historically situated within shifting political-economic imperatives and ruling mentalities that shape the governance of urban nature. Competitive efforts by city and state governments to attract global investment, reliant on credit ratings by independent agencies, critically alter the meanings and values associated with water in the urban landscape. In Chennai, as in other Indian cities, water bodies and waterways are now, above all, emblems of the city's aspiration to world-class status. Waterfront development, beautification, and eco-restoration, along with high-end infrastructure, are both direct strategies for capital accumulation through real estate value as well as idioms through which cities position themselves in the global arena. These rationalities explain, at least in part, the seeming incoherence of the simultaneous proposals to restore the Cooum and to build an elevated highway into its banks.

Indeed, all waterways in Chennai are currently being viewed as potential hosts to elevated road corridors. The ambitious integrated Chennai High Speed Circular Transportation Corridor (HSCTC) plan comprises nine corridors along the Adyar and Cooum rivers and the Buckingham and Mambalam canals (Division of Transportation Engineering 2009). The figure of the "corridor" is another powerful symbol of the globalising city, an idiom that integrates structure, ecology, commerce and governance. Information Technology (IT) corridors, hi-tech corridors, metro corridors and elevated corridors are emblems of new urban visions in which flows are channelled and strategically optimised for mobility,

connectivity and speed. The river corridor thus both engineers the landscape and signals a new paradigm of urbanisation. More than 36,000 families, or close to two lakh people, are expected to be evicted from slums along these waterways to accommodate these high-speed corridors.

Also being reproduced on other waterways of Chennai is the paradoxical partnership of eco-restoration with real estate development and elevated corridors, with sorry consequences for the river. The Adyar Poonga Trust (APT) formed by the government of Tamil Nadu in 2007 to restore the estuarine creek near the mouth of the Adyar river, opted to create an eco-park on one section of the creek, for which hundreds of huts were evicted, and thousands more homes of the poor threatened with demolition. However, these efforts to restore the creek were already moot as the government had, over the preceding decade, permitted intensive development in the form of IT office buildings, multi-storied luxury residential complexes and five-star hotels on the remainder of the estuarine lands near the mouth of the river, irreversibly damaging the fragile ecology of the creek.

The APT, meanwhile, has diversified its role to developing proposals for large-scale transport projects for the city, and has been entrusted with implementation of the integrated elevated corridor project along Chennai's waterways. This new role should come as no surprise, as the eco-restoration of the Adyar creek was initially entrusted to the Tamil Nadu Road Development Corporation, a special purpose vehicle formed to build toll roads. The APT itself is coordinated by the Tamil Nadu Urban Infrastructure Financial Services Limited, an infrastructure financing agency. The trust, recently renamed the Chennai Rivers Restoration Trust, will also be charged with implementing the Cooum restoration project, further evidence of how much eco-restoration itself has become part of the requisite infrastructure of the world-class city.

Epochs of Environmentality

Historical shifts in rationalities that connect municipal governance to paradigms of spatial planning and social engineering are also evidenced in the case of water bodies in Chennai. Where urban water bodies such as *eris*, ponds and marshes were once seen as land-in-the-making, to be filled and reclaimed for bus-stops, institutions, housing projects and dump yards, they are now seen as lakes-in-the-making, to be cleared, dredged, de-silted and beautified. These shifting rationalities are underpinned by transformations in conceptions of the urban – from developmentalist visions of cities as sites of social and economic mobility and catalysts of modernity for the region, to neoliberal visions of cities as strategic nodes for the operations of financial globalisation.

It was not until the 1990s that water officially came into its own in Chennai, as the concept of "ecological value" began to figure in official planning documents, and increasingly to overlap with commercial value.[3] The government's compulsion to demonstrate concern for environmental issues resulted partly from its participation in global platforms such as the Sustainable Chennai Project (SCP)[4] partly from the amplified voice that local civil society environmental groups had achieved, and partly from the increased severity of droughts interspersed and alternating with floods, which created unprecedented crises in the city. More serious attention to flood alleviation, water harvesting and rainwater conservation through water body reclamation and restoration began to be articulated, for instance in Chennai's Second Master Plan (2007) and in the planning documents of the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board, also known as Metro Water.

That these policies were also seen as opportunities to clear the poor out of the city and from prime locations in adjoining municipalities is clear from the convergence that began to emerge, both discursively and in funding schemes, between these flood mitigation/water harvesting programmes and the increasingly forcefully articulated visions of a "slum-free Chennai". The TNSCB from the 1990s began to focus its energies on large-scale construction of resettlement colonies on the urban peripheries, financed substantially by money from the central government's flood alleviation programme, World Bank-sponsored post-tsunami projects and the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), which also funds water body restoration projects in Chennai.

The profound change in Tamil Nadu's political climate relating to issues of the environment and the poor was evidenced in the Tank Encroachment Act passed in May 2007. This act ignored or reversed long-established policies guiding slum clearance in Tamil Nadu and vested unprecedented powers in the Public Works Department and the District Collector's Office to effect evictions, entirely bypassing the TNSCB. The thrust on reviving storage capacity in water bodies received powerful political backing from the state's ministers, members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) and members of Parliament (MPs) in the late 2000s. Slum eviction drives have thus recently received a special impetus by being located in two convergent strands of apparently progressive "salvage" discourses: one of ecological restoration and the other of slum resettlement with promises of "secure tenure".

What disrupts this tight compact, however, is the fact that the mass relocation colonies are almost always sited on low-lying marshlands or flood plains on the city's peripheries. According to environmentalists, Chennai's notorious Kannagi Nagar, a slum resettlement colony housing 15,000 families, built on land reclaimed from the Pallikaranai marsh, has contributed to the recent intensification of flooding in that area as well as the significant reduction of groundwater. For residents of Kannagi Nagar, their continued susceptibility to floods is now exacerbated by the added vulnerabilities of livelihood loss, severe liquidity crunches and chronic indebtedness, consequences of their distance from the economic opportunities of the city. In April 2010, newspapers reported the sinking of multi-storied tenement blocks built for slum-dwellers on a tank bed at Ammankulam near Coimbatore, vindicating fears that Kannagi Nagar residents expressed about their location on a marsh.[5]

Slums as Scapegoats

Scapegoating the poor has become part of the official discourse of salvaging urban ecologies over the past two decades. Chennai's City Development Plan, written for the JNNURM in 2005, stated that some 35,000 households squatting on "objectionable locations" on the city's riverbanks would have to be removed as they were

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Application forms are available on request at the address given below or from the Academic Staff College, University of Hyderabad.

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Please submit a demand draft of Rs 500 in favour of **"The Director, UGC-Academic Staff College, University of Hyderabad"**, payable at Hyderabad, along with the application form.

Important Dates:

Last date for Receipt of Applications:	June 1, 2010
Selection	June 10, 2010
Selected participants confirm participation:	June 25, 2010
Selected candidates send in draft research papers	June 25, 2010

(Papers must be sent only after candidates are informed about selection)

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polluting the water with raw sewage. This claim was never officially substantiated, even though it contradicted available evidence.[6] The state's resolve to evict slum-dwellers a priori is also evidenced by the response of the TNSCB in 2004 to a study commissioned by Metro Water on low-cost sanitation for slums on the city's waterways.[7] Instead of exploring the options proposed by the study, the board dismissed the report with a short note: "As it is proposed to rehabilitate all the waterways families, this study may not be helpful."[8] Thus, a potentially feasible and low-cost option for improving conditions in slums and reducing their environmental impact on the river was dropped in favour of the high-cost resettlement of 35,000 households.

That slum eviction as a line item has become the primary measure of river restoration is also indicative of a specific historical moment in urban politics and governance. While clearing encroachments on river banks has figured in river-cleaning action plans for decades, it was usually much lower on the list of interventions, partly because the political and policy climate in Chennai until the 1980s made this a difficult task to accomplish.

Until the mid to late 1980s, evictions and relocations were largely avoided by an established tradition that interpreted "slum clearance" as in situ improvement of slums through tenement construction or sites-and-services schemes. This tradition was established through a dialogic process of negotiation and accommodation between the electoral strategies of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the official policies of the TNSCB, and anti-eviction struggles in the city. However, a concatenation of processes through the 1980s and early 1990s led to the collapse of this anti-eviction "compact" and inaugurated an era of negotiations over slum relocation and resettlement.

The World Bank's funding of urban development programmes in Tamil Nadu from the late 1970s, particularly in the housing sector, brought about a restructuring of the TNSCB, primarily through dissolving its formal connections with the political sphere and loosening its dependence on state budgets. The 1990s also saw a gradual weakening and eventual collapse of slum-based, struggle-oriented collective action against evictions, once again resulting from a convergence of several interconnected trends. The hardening stance of state agencies towards squatting in the inner city and the strenuous outreach and persuasion efforts by the trained social workers of the TNSCB's Community Development Wing resulted in relocation becoming an acceptable option among slum-dwellers in the 1980s. The growth of the state-sponsored self-help group movement in slums, mediated through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), fostered relations of patronage and cooptation between the state and NGOs and between NGOs and slum associations. Gradual changes in the occupancy of slums, a strengthening grip of divisive party politics in slum communities, and the gentrification of TNSCB tenements, combined with the state's persuasive tactics, weakened the cohesion needed to stand up to eviction drives (Raman 2008; Coelho and Venkat 2009).

These historical shifts in the governance of urban water and of the urban poor are reflected in the transformed cultural and political imaginary of rivers in Chennai. This is most eloquently evidenced by the recent projects on the Cooum, a river that has long been an emblem of DMK rule. Housing masses of Chennai's working poor and many small industries along its banks, the Cooum symbolised the party's sustained populist hegemony among the city's working classes. With the changing electoral calculus of the late 1980s and 1990s, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (AIADMK) electoral successes in Chennai in the recent past, and compulsions to competitively demonstrate capacities for a neoliberal transformation of the city, the DMK, in its current run, has reprised the Cooum as a different kind of embodiment of its "progressive" rule.

Recent Cooum projects, with their singular agendas of slum evictions, are capped by the grandiose new government complex that was recently inaugurated on one end of the river bank, built at a cost of Rs 200 crore by the German firm GMP International. It is widely seen as a swansong bid by the 85-year old chief minister, who seemed intent on running his government from the new building in his lifetime. Thus are the changing politics of the city inscribed on this river of the city.

NOTES

1 These problems include stopping industrial dumping and sewage outfalls, enforcing regulations, and achieving coordination among the multiple agencies involved in the rivers' sustenance.

2 The TNSCB, in response to a Right to Information (RTI) application, estimated the number of families to be evicted for the elevated corridor at 12,000. The figure of 6,000 for the restoration project is derived from Ramakrishnan (2009).

3 The Sustainable Chennai Project (SCP), launched in 1995 by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, UN-HABITAT and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to build capacity in urban environmental planning and management, and locally coordinated by the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), was a prominent example of attempts to mainstream commercial and financial stakes in restoration of water bodies. The project identified waterways cleaning as one of its four priority issues, and the principal stakeholders listed in its documents included "chambers of industry and commerce", and "financing institutions for water front development" along with government agencies. Apart from some prominent NGOs, the public were not included in the list.

4 See: Metro Water (2004): "Consultancy for a Comprehensive Sanitation and Solid Waste Management Plan including Low-Cost Sanitation for the Slums Located in the Banks of Chennai City Waterways", Chennai.

5 Interview with Latha, Kannagi Nagar resident, 22 January 2010.

6 A 1989 consultancy report entitled "Environmental Improvement of Watercourses of Greater Madras" by Severn Trent International, commissioned by the Corporation of Madras, found that less than 1% of the pollution in the river was attributable to the slums. In 1995, a report titled "Action Plan for Urban Waterways Improvement in Madras and Varanasi", by Abt Associates concluded that untreated or partially-treated effluents from Metro Water's sewerage plants and pumping stations were by far the most important sources of pollution in the Cooum and Adyar rivers.

7 Refer to end note 4.

8 TNSCB (2004): Note dated 11 May, illegible signature.

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